

John 13:31-35

Acts 11:1-18

I'm sure that many of us here this morning have been, or continue to be, active members of various clubs, societies or special interest groups - sports clubs, gyms, alumni associations, charitable organisations, or a club which relates to a particular hobby of ours. Each of these, of course, are founded upon either a common interest (like a desire to lose weight or an interest in railways), or they might be simply based on the fact that we had attended a particular school or university. But what about the *Church* – the Body of Christ – of which we are *all* members? Yes, we all share a common Faith and a common purpose. But what is meant to be the *practical* basis of our life *together*, as the community of God's people?

Well, this is precisely what is addressed by Our Lord in this morning's Gospel reading. The setting is the Last Supper, and Jesus has just washed his disciples' feet – it's an act of loving service which points

forward to the Cross – to the supreme demonstration of love. God's self-giving love is seen in the giving of his Son to die for sinful humanity. And so, it's in *this* context that the Lord gives his New Commandment – the commandment to love one another. For love is to be the primary characteristic of the new community of the risen, ascended and glorified Lord Jesus.

So, what exactly is the nature of this love? It might seem an odd question to ask, but the fact remains that although we use this four-letter word so frequently in our everyday speech, and although it's the subject of the lyrics of most pop songs, it's at the same time probably the most misused and misunderstood word in the world. You can 'sing a million love songs', but never arrive at any clearer understanding of what love is really all about. In popular thinking, it remains a largely vague, abstract concept.

By contrast, when we look into the New Testament, the 'love' which is so frequently spoken of here has a

very clear and concrete meaning. Back in the first century, the Greek-speaking world was familiar with different types of love – there was the love expressed in friendship (‘philia’), there was sexual love (‘eros’), and there was the kind of love which binds families together (‘storge’); in English, we just have the one word, ‘love’, but the Greek language had different words to describe these different types of love. But the original Greek word used here in our Gospel reading is ἀγαπᾶτε – it’s a word which is virtually unheard of outside of the New Testament, and it describes a love which gives of itself for the good of the person receiving it. It is precisely the same kind of love which God, the Great Lover, has for us, and which is seen supremely in Jesus Christ. In a sense, the love which the first disciples experienced in Jesus was so special that they had to find a unique word to describe it. So, when the Lord calls upon his followers to love one another “*just as I have loved you*”, he is commanding us to imitate *his* ἀγαπᾶτε love. Christ demonstrates his inexpressible love for us through his death on the Cross – it’s the love which makes the ultimate sacrifice. And it’s

precisely this kind of love – the ‘love so amazing, so divine’ - which the Lord calls upon his disciples to express towards each other. *He* is our example.

And Jesus describes it as a “*new commandment*”; that’s not to say that it’s intrinsically different from the law of love in the Old Testament, nor is it new because of the way in which Jesus re-defines what it means to love one’s neighbour to include *all* people (including our enemies). Rather, it’s *new* because it is the law of the ‘new covenant’, established through Jesus’ death. And *we* are the people of that *new* covenant. Our love for one another ought to be our natural response to what God in Christ has done for us – *we* love because God *first* loved *us*.

In fact, it’s helpful to note that when John talks of love – both in his Gospel and in his three letters – he’s primarily concerned with love *within* the Christian community. This doesn’t, of course, mean that he was implying that followers of Jesus should only really bother themselves with loving their fellow believers. No, the point is that the Church should be

that community which serves as a model for relationships in *wider* society.

Because *αγαπε* love has an evangelistic power. The Lord declares, “By *this* everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have *love* for one another.” Love amongst believers is a powerful witness to the world. When this love is seen, people will know that we have been with Jesus. The early Church certainly aimed to be a radically different community – one in which their love for one another transcended all differences of ethnic origin, social status and gender. They really had the potential to pose a challenge to society at large – and they certainly did so. The early Church Father, Tertullian, famously contrasted pagan reactions to Christians with their own behaviour:

“Look”, they say, “how they love one another” (for they themselves hate one another); “and how they are ready to die for each other” (for they themselves are readier to kill each other).

Of course, it wasn't all 'plain sailing' in the early Church. In our reading from Acts, we find there a situation in which the apostle Peter was being

criticised by Jewish believers in Jerusalem for having spent time with Gentiles. Peter had just proclaimed the gospel to the Roman centurion Cornelius, and Cornelius and his household had accepted Christ and had received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Gentiles were now being accepted into the family of God's people alongside God's chosen people Israel. And so, the Jewish believers had to learn to love *all* who were being brought into Christ's flock – Jew and Gentile alike; all are *one* in Christ.

You don't need me to remind you, though, that sadly, as time progressed, the Church gradually became more and more integrated into wider society and even began to take on some of the characteristics of it – in other words, it lost its *radical* edge. And still today, the Church tends to continue to come across as being no different to any other human institution, with its class distinctions, discrimination, individualism, and, of course its factionalism – playing on our denominational divisions rather than celebrating what we have in common. It's not surprising that when people

witness the way in which folk sometimes carry on in church, their reaction is, 'if that's what Christians are like, then I really don't want to know!'

So, we really need to regain a vision of what it means to be that *loving* community which bears witness to the truth of the gospel by the way in which we relate to one another – a fellowship founded upon a sacrificial love which places the needs of *others* above our own.

And that ἀγάπη love can be expressed in different ways. It's reflected, most obviously, in our practical care for one another – seeking to support each other. We are *all* called, as the apostle Paul puts it, to "have the same care for one another....." – to suffer with those who suffer, to rejoice with those who rejoice. And this includes *praying* for one another; supporting each other in prayer *is* a profound expression of love.

And let's remember that when we talk about loving one another, we need to think globally *as well as*

locally. As members of the body of Christ, we are part, not just of a *local* community of believers, but we are part of the *worldwide* family of God. And so, this is why a key expression of our love is to stand in solidarity with, and to regularly pray for and support, our many millions of brothers and sisters in Christ in so many different countries who are persecuted on account of their faith. They can so easily be forgotten, simply because it's so much easier for us to just love those whom we see – whom we know personally in our local church – than those fellow believers thousands of miles away.

Politicians are constantly talking about what a fairer, more caring society should look like, and they pass pieces of legislation which claim to achieve that aim. But in the end, there's only a limit to what government can actually do to create this, whatever party is in power. So, we should be asking ourselves what *we*, as Christ's body, are doing to influence society at large by the way in which *we* relate to one another. For we can, and should, be a community

which, in turn, is an effective catalyst for the transformation of wider society.

As we share together in Holy Communion, we are powerfully reminded of what I call the vertical *and* horizontal dimensions of the sacrament. On the one hand, it's about our *individual* relationship with the Lord – as we partake of his Body and Blood, Christ draws near to us as we draw near to him. Yet at the same time, we share in Communion *alongside* our brothers and sisters in the Lord. So, as we do so this morning, may we be reminded of what it means for us to be part of that new community of love.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you call us to be your people. We pray that you would inspire us by your Holy Spirit as we seek to bear witness to your truth by our love for one another. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.